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20. Gender Discrimination and Health of Women

Mrs. Sanjivane Godsay

Head and Associate Professor, Department of Home Science, Govt. College of Arts and Science,
Aurangabad.

Dr. Anuradha Nisal

Assistant Professor, Department of Home Science, Govt. College of Arts and Science,
Aurangabad.

Abstract:

Gender is a common term, whereas gender discrimination is meant only for women because females are the only victims of gender discrimination. Gender inequality in India finds its beginning in Indian homes, with the conception of work firmly rooted in the Indian psyche. Indian women face many health problems due to gender discrimination. The present investigation is undertaken to study factors responsible for gender discrimination and its effect on the health of women. The present study is a secondary research.

Key Words: Women, Gender Discrimination, Health, Nutrition

Introduction:

“There is no Tool for Development more Effective than the Empowerment of Women”

(Kofi Annan)

India is a male dominating society and gender inequality is customized habitually. Gender inequality in India finds its beginning in Indian homes, with the conception of work firmly rooted in the Indian psyche. Gender is a common term, whereas gender discrimination is meant only for women, because females are the only victims of gender discrimination. Females are nearly 50% the total population but their representation in public life is very low. Gender discrimination as the name suggests is the unfair treatment of women and denial of opportunities and violation of their rights. In the convention on the elimination of all forms discrimination against women (CEDAW) gender discrimination was defined as “any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on the equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedom in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field”. Despite the numerous gender discrimination



prevailing in India. There is a strong belief that daughter is a liability. High dowry cost for the marriage of daughter, often results in the mistreatment of the girl child. Sons are often the only person entitled to perform funeral rights for their parents. It is strongly believed that religious practices for parent's afterlife can only be performed by males.

- Old Age Support from Son: Preference for son is one of the major causes of inequality. They are supposed to support the old age security of their parent.
- Women Inequality in Decision Making: Women have less authority than men in legal recognition and protection as well as lower access to public knowledge and information and less decision making power; within and outside home.

Effect of Gender Discrimination on Women's Health:

The high level of gender inequality in India negatively affects the health of women. Indian women face most of the health problems due to discrimination. Women's health in India can be examined in terms of multiple indicators, which vary by geography, socioeconomic standing and culture. Gender is one of the main social determinants of health which includes social, economic and political factors that play a major role in health outcomes of women in India and access to health care in India (Balrajan, Y; Selvaraj, S 2011). Gender discrimination begins before birth; females are the most commonly aborted sex in India (Raj, Anita 2011). If a female foetus is not aborted, the mother's pregnancy can be a stressful experience due to family preference for a son (Patel, V; Rodrigues, M 2002).

A girl child is prone to being fed less than sons, especially when there are girls already in the households. The habit of feeding less quantity to the girl child affects their nutritional status. Gender inequalities in turn are directly related to poor health. In India women frequently underreport their illnesses, due to cultural norms and gender expectations within the house. Adequate nutrition, a fundamental requirement of any individual's health, is especially critical for women because inadequate nutrition affects not only women's own health but also health of their children. Children of malnourished women are more likely to face cognitive impairment, lower resistance to infections, poor nutritional status, and a higher risk of disease and death throughout their life.

Malnutrition affects women's health in different ways. It weakens women's ability to survive childbirth, makes them more susceptible to infections, and leaves them with fewer reserves to recover from illness. Malnutrition undermines women's productivity, capacity in



generate income, and ability to care for their families. Globally 50 percent of all pregnant women are anaemic, and at least 120 million women in less developed countries are underweight. The common disorders associated with malnutrition in women are iron deficiency anaemia, underweight, osteoporosis, osteoarthritis, and depression.

Women's reproductive health is an important concern of women's health that goes largely ignored. In India the maternal mortality rates are high. Undernourished women are likely to suffer from anaemia, which is also a factor for maternal death. Multiple pregnancies, preference for son, inability to take stance against the family and underlying patriarchal society have impact on the health of women, including maternal mortality, infant mortality, low birth weight and antenatal anaemia.

Gender inequality damages the physical and mental health of girls and women. Inadequate and poor nutrition, lack of access to skilled health care, poor reproductive health and gender discrimination against girls are the major causes of high mortality rates. Gender disparity in nutrition starts from infancy and continues up to adulthood. Nutritional deprivation amongst girls leads to improper growth and deficiency of nutrients. Iron deficiency anaemia is the most common deficiency. Anaemia is most prevalent amongst adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women. It is one of the major causes of maternal and infant mortality.

Gender inequalities are a strong driver of HIV/ AIDS, Tuberculosis and malaria. Women and girls tend to have unequal power in sexual relationships, economic decision making and access to health information and services, all of which greatly influence their vulnerability to disease. Domestic violence, rape, and sexual abuse against women affect their productivity, autonomy, quality of life, and physical and mental wellbeing. Sexual abuse during childhood enhances the mental depression and reproductive tract infection in later life, which may lead to female infertility.

Conclusion:

Good nutrition is a key criterion which contributes to human wellbeing and economic growth. Adequate nutrition for women would help them to serve as productive members of the society to develop consequent healthy generations. Promoting gender equality, including increasing women's control over resources and their ability to make decisions is crucial. Addressing gender inequalities can help ensure that women get the nutrition they need, improving their own health and that of their families, and ultimately contribute to their society's



development. One must believe in equality and should work at it. Not only men but women also need to change their mindset, as through cultural conditioning they have also become a part of the same exploitative system of patriarchy and are playing a supportive role. Women should be empowered through education to become self reliant, economically independent; where they can go out in the world fearless and fight for their rights. Nutrition and health education should be strengthened via department of health to improve the nutritional status of mother and child. It is said that "Girls with dream become women with vision", and for this women should empower themselves.

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